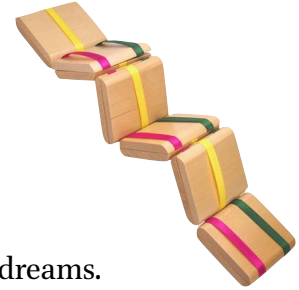


THE LADDER THAT NEVER WOBBLES

A sermon on Genesis 28:10-22

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

Jacob's Ladder is such a familiar story,
and yet it is from a time and place and culture so foreign to us.
At the beginning of the story, Jacob is fleeing from his very angry brother
(he didn't take too kindly to being tricked out of his birthright.)
To protect him, his parents send Jacob to his mother's kin in Mesopotamia
to find a wife for himself there.
And on the way, this story happens. With head on a very rocky pillow Jacob dreams.



If you had such a dream, would you take it seriously?
You might take a stab at dream analysis
and suppose that it is a signal from your subconscious of something.
Or would you shrug it off as “just a dream,” i.e. not real.
In the modern mind, things of spiritual nature tend to be dismissed
and cut off from this so-called “real,” that is material world.

But to the ancient mind, the spiritual world is every bit as real as the material world.
This is what the Nicene Creed means by “all things visible and invisible,” or “seen and unseen”
Of course, it is rather difficult to see and understand the spiritual world.
And this difficulty was seen to be due to a sort of spiritual immaturity or inexperience,

Until such time as the soul is mature enough to receive the Lord, He will only sometimes allow it to see and sense that He is present everywhere and fills all things. These are moments of indescribable joy. But after that, the Lord hides Himself from us once again in order that we might yearn for Him and seek Him with all our heart.

Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives: The Life and Teachings of Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica p.155

And we seek him especially through time spent in silence and stillness and prayer.
What that silence and stillness and prayer accomplishes is a purifying of the νους “nous”
— that’s a Greek word that is sometimes translated as “mind,” or “heart,”
but denotes a sort of capacity to perceive the truth of things, including spiritual things.

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But every once and again, even without an entirely settled nous,
one could get glimpses of the unseen spiritual world, and especially through dreams,
which was understood as a state in which,
with no other inputs from sight and a relaxed mind, that is a settled nous,
could see things that really were, but were normally obscured.



Not everyone could correctly interpret their dreams
— for that an ancient person would consult someone wise
if the dream seemed important.

Think of the pharaoh asking Joseph what his dreams meant.
Or Nebuchadnezzar asking Daniel to both tell him his dream and what it meant.

But Jacob seems to get what's going on in his vision of the Ladder.
And in his interpretation he tells us something interesting that you may have missed.
He says that this place is the **House of God** and the **Gate of Heaven**.
In Jacob's world, the Gate of Heaven or the Gate of the gods meant something.
It meant Babylon, in the Babylonian language, *Bab-ilu* is Gate of the Gods.
And no, Jacob isn't lost, he knows that he is not in distant Babylon,
but he here declared a sort of parallel, and inverse parallel,
with the infamous Tower of Babel, which thought to be in Babylon.
(The Israelites called the place Babel, meaning in Hebrew scattered or confused,
because that is what it sounded like to them).

In both the Tower of Babylon and Jacob's Ladder there is a bridge between earth and heaven.
Both are described with the phrase "it's top reached to heavens"
- the only two places in the Hebrew scriptures where that exact wording appears.



Only the Babel bridge never quite got that far.
It was a work of human ingenuity and skill and towering ambition.
It depended solely on human effort and cooperation.
Archeologically speaking, scholars think that
the tower of Babel was a ziggurat style temple dedicated to the
Babylonian god Marduk.
Construction had been halted for a historically unknown reason
- perhaps something to do a certain breakdown in communication?

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(that is suggested in a Sumerian legend parallel to the biblical Tower of Babel)
Anyhow, the half-built tower stood for centuries before finally falling into ruin.

The bridge Jacob sees is different.

The same purpose is accomplished - joining heaven and earth,
only it is *actually* accomplished this time!

Jacob's ladder is firmly established - i.e. not in ruins.

And it comes from God.

And it is in use.

The perfect tense is used for this going up and going down business,
again signalling that this is an ongoing thing.

Heaven and Earth ARE connected - this is God's doing and it is marvelous in our sight.



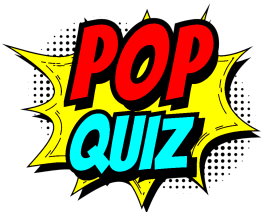
And Jacob hears from the Lord himself, assuring him of God's good promises,
to bless him and be with him always.

And if God is going to do all that, Jacob responds in thanksgiving, vowing to serve God and offer tithes to Him, and to remember what he has been shown.

But what does it all mean?

Some Sunday School programs are designed in such a way that
the answer to every question thrown at child is "Jesus"
- because it does not matter what the question is, the answer is always Jesus.
It's pedagogically problematic but theologically a good principle.

Let's practice - remember the answer is always Jesus.



Question 1: What does the Rock under Jacob's head represent? **JESUS**

Because Jesus is our Rock, and he belongs at our head.

Question 2: What does the Ladder represent? **JESUS**

In the Gospel of John, Jesus himself says that He is the Ladder,
when He's explaining to Nathaniel that he will see

"heaven opening and angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man." (John 1:51)

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Other possible answers include:

- the Virgin Mary because it is how God comes down to us,
- or the Church because it raises our minds to heavenly things,
- or the cross ... because it is made of wood.

Last one, *Question 3: Who is standing beside Jacob? JESUS*

You're so good at this. Gold stars for you all.

In the Greek version it says something more like he stood above the ladder
or perhaps leaned on the ladder, like he's reaching down from the top.

And according to Caesarius of Arles (5th century bishop in Gaul),

"What could it mean to lean on the ladder, except to hang on the cross!"

These are all things that Church Fathers have said about Jacob's Ladder

- they tended to see types of Christ foreshadowed everywhere.

And it is important that the Ladder points to Christ,

for He is the True Ladder in whom Heaven and Earth meet.

It is also important that Jacob's Ladder is ... a ladder.

Something that allows one to climb upwards.

The goal isn't only a tower to poke at God with and boast of such an accomplishment,
but rather a way to draw near to Him even as He draws near to us.

One of the most famous and influential interpretations came in the form of a book
entitled *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*,
written around the year 600.

The author, known to us as John of the Ladder,

wrote of climbing Jacob's ladder, a ladder with 30 rungs,
by which one could advance in the spiritual life (for every rung goes higher higher).

The first few are about obedience and self-discipline (proper to soldiers of the cross),
before reaching rungs 8-17, concerning the defeat of vices and acquisition of virtue,
then rungs 18-26 deal with the spiritual traps that can derail those hard won virtues,
and the cultivation of much needed humility,
and finally the last rungs 27-30 detail peace of soul, the settled nous, and prayer of the heart.

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And in all these things, our characters become like Christ

by doing the things Christ does,
by climbing the ladder that is Christ himself.



But all the while in the midst of this climbing, we recognize at every rung
that it isn't our effort that is transforming us
as much as is God's grace with which we but cooperate.

After all, it is by God's grace that the Ladder is there,
and not just there but fixed firmly.

It is God's will to join Heaven and Earth and be close to us,
a will that was seen by Jacob,
remembered through the centuries,
and fulfilled in Christ.

*Now to the One who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*